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Nonfiction in Brief

by ALEX RAKSIN

L.A. IS THE CAPITAL OF KANSAS
Painful Lessons in Post-New York Living
by Richard Meltzer
(Harmony Books: $16.95)

Richard Meltzer has been called the Hunter S. Thompson of the 1980s, more obscure than the father of Gonzo journalism only because the counterculture doesn't command the attention it did in the 1960s. There are resemblances. Like Thompson, Meltzer is fleeing a complacent (he would say "comatose") America, a country more eager to prosper in wealth than in community or culture. Also like Thompson, Meltzer conceals his gentle sensitivity in raucous writing and gritty living; he is magnetized by tough cities, language and sports.

But there's a difference in Meltzer's prose, one that has cast him further out on the cultural fringe than Thompson: an absence of hope. On the run from his own failures and those of the nation, Thompson was searching for something better. His idea of Utopia was short of practical ("Turn the highways all into grassy malls, where everybody, even freaks, could do whatever's right"), but he offered a kind of humor and optimism that is lacking here. Meltzer blames virtually everyone for making culture vapid, as in this passage about Hollywood's exportation of "Obsolescent . . . Hogwash" to Middle America. "They send us fresh and nutritionally bankrupt CORN FLAKES; we send 'em stale and mega-lethal LIES ABOUT THEMSELVES."

Occasionally, Meltzer's real feelings penetrate the veil of anger, and we see a man with whom we can empathize. Meltzer misses a sense of community. "The mystery and hunger of Place, of every last palpable nuance of Locale, so central a theme to [Raymond] Chandler, both literarily and metaphysically, no longer really plays in these parts except as nostalgia." And while driving down a deserted highway on a cross-country trip, he quotes from "Wichita Lineman," Jimmy Webb's song about loneliness and belonging: "'I hear you singing through the wire, I can hear you through the whine'—I'd give years off my life to hear [that piece]. And I'd give more than that for the code by which nothing yields something." Here, Meltzer hints that his own spiritual crisis might have something to do with the bleakness of his observations; this honesty is short-lived, however, as Meltzer hurries off to hipper chapters like "Napalm Newport Beach!"

THE BONDS OF LOVE
Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination
by Jessica Benjamin
(Pantheon: $22.95)

When not at its most constructive, feminism has stood by the sidelines and blamed men for everything from world wars to environmental destruction and institutionalized racism. In this delicately, densely argued book, the author, a feminist and New York City psychoanalyst, offers an original alternative to this simplistic form of finger-pointing. Jessica Benjamin admits that "even the more sophisticated feminist thinkers frequently shy away from the analysis of submission, for fear that in admitting woman's participation in the relationship of domination, the onus of responsibility will appear to shift from men to women, and the moral victory from women to men."

Women, however, play a far more crucial role in early childhood development than Freud had predicted, Benjamin writes, citing new trends in psychoanalytic thought. It is now believed that pathological social traits, such as domination and submission, can originate in the mother-child relationship, as well as in later rivalries between father and son. To break the cycle of domination and submission, Benjamin suggests, mothers must "recognize the necessary tension between self-assertion and mutual recognition that allows self and other to meet as sovereign equals." While the issues Benjamin addresses will be familiar to most readers, her language will not. Benjamin says she has "preserved many technical and specialized details for the endnotes," but "The Bonds of Love" is clouded by academese: "The intersubjective model of self and other," reads a typical sentence, "is abstracted from the web of intrapsychic life." Overall, though, this is an intelligent, constructive book, suggesting why it is so difficult for men and women to meet as equals and why people submit to authority and even derive pleasure from the power others have over them.

WORKING
My Life as a Prostitute
by Dolores French with Linda Lee
(E. P. Dutton: $18.95)

While our society now tolerates the most bizarre life-styles—some doctors even specialize in sex-change operations, for one—prostitution, one of America's oldest social institutions, still remains deeply offensive to radical feminists, members of the Moral Majority and most of us in between. And so we open this book with a host of preconceptions, expecting to find a vulgar underworld of intravenous drug users, pale women lurking in skimpy attire on dark streets. We are in for a surprise, though, for Dolores French confounds stereotypes in this spunky, though sometimes smug autobiography. French, a "courtesan" in Atlanta who charges up to $2,000 for a weekend, believes she provides emotional, rather than simply sexual, gratification. She lures in wealthy, respectable clients with Surreal ads (one lists a P.O. Box number after the phrase, "white roses, red wine, Lago Maggiore, Puccini, Monet, artichokes") and then learns about their work and family to give the impression of friendship (insisting that this is not deceptive, French claims that her clients realize the relationship is professional).

Most surprising is the way French has lent an air of semi-legitimacy to her trade. An appointed member on the Mayor's Task force on Prostitution in Atlanta in 1985-86, a consultant on the Centers for Disease Control study on prostitution and AIDS in 1986 and president of HIRE ("Hooking Is Real Employment"), she has forced community leaders to recognize her profession. That they did in 1985, arresting French for charges that were later dropped in a judicial comedy of errors which French is clearly fond of recounting. Usually, though, French has found that the government turns a blind eye to her trade—except during tax time, when, she reports, prostitutes must pay their dues or go to jail. French is unlikely to liberalize our attitudes toward prostitution, for she (unwittingly) confirms what is perhaps most offensive about prostitution: the way it makes something so intimate become so impersonal. "Working" remains compelling, however, for its strangeness, liveliness and emotional complexity.

THE PURSUIT OF THE AMERICAN CHARACTER
by Rupert Wilkinson
(Harper & Row: $14.95)

This is a sometimes-flighty overview of academicians' attempts since 1940 to define what it means to be an American. Rupert Wilkinson, a history professor working in England and educated at Stanford, tries to summarize past currents of thought and to link them together through new theories of his own. He succeeds in the former, exploring theories from the 1940s, when the primary focus was on the effects of social pressures, to the 1980s, when social scientists studied the effects of isolated, unstable egoism.

More questionable, however, is Wilkinson's upbeat portrayal of social science as central to American culture. Writing that Americans have always "tended to erode gentlemanly distinctions between academic and applied ideas," he seems oblivious to the fact that social science has fallen from popular favor since the 1970s, when Keynesian economics failed to cure economic ills such as inflation. Wilkinson, nevertheless, gives readers a rare chance to reflect on the flurry of seminal books published in past decades, excavating old, though still topical books like Margaret Mead's "And Keep Your Powder Dry: An Anthropologist Looks at America," which eloquently captures our hunger for roots and common identity. As Mead wrote, "We are all third generation."

First Light
by Linda Hogan

In early morning
I forget I'm in this world
with crooked chiefs
who make federal deals.

In the first light
I remember who rewards me for living,
not bosses
but singing birds and blue sky.

I know I can bathe and stretch,
make jewelry and love
the witch and wise woman
living inside, needing to be silenced
and put at rest for work's long day.

In the first light
I offer cornmeal
and tobacco.
I say hello to those who came before me,
and to birds
under the eaves,
and budding plants.

I know the old ones are here.
And every morning I remember the song
about how buffalo left through a hole in the sky
and how the grandmothers look out from those holes
watching over us
from there and from there.

For Robin

From "Savings" by Linda Hogan (Coffee House Press: $7.95, paper; 80 pp.). Hogan, a member of the Chickasaw Nation, received an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation for her most recent book, "Seeing Through the Sun." She has published poetry, fiction and essays in numerous magazines and anthologies. Hogan is an associate professor at the University of Minnesota and is active in the Birds of Prey Rehabilitation Foundation in Lakewood, Colo. ©1988, Linda Hogan. Reprinted by permission of publisher.

THE BOOK REVIEW

JACK MILES, *Times Book Editor*

NEXT SUNDAY

David Roberts, **Jean Stafford: A Biography** (Little, Brown)

Wanda Coleman, **A War of Eyes & Other Stories** (Black Sparrow Press)

Jimmy Carter, **An Outdoor Journal: Adventures and Reflexes** (Bantam Books)

Allen Lacy, **The American Gardener** (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) and Bonnie Maranca, editor, **American Garden Writing** (PAJ Publications)

Kirk Douglas, **The Ragman's Son** (Simon & Schuster)

Michael Tolkin, **The Player** (A Morgan Book The Atlantic Monthly Press)

SOON IN VIEW

Patricia Marx and Douglas G. McGrath, **Blockbuster** (Bantam)

Thomas Savage, **The Corner of Rife and Pacific** (Morrow)

Joe Keenan, **Blue Heaven** (Penguin)

Annette Williams Jaffee, **Recent History** (Putnam's)

Robert Wright, **Three Scientists and Their Gods** (Times Books)

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